

*The Working Artist's* Guide to

# PUBLIC ART

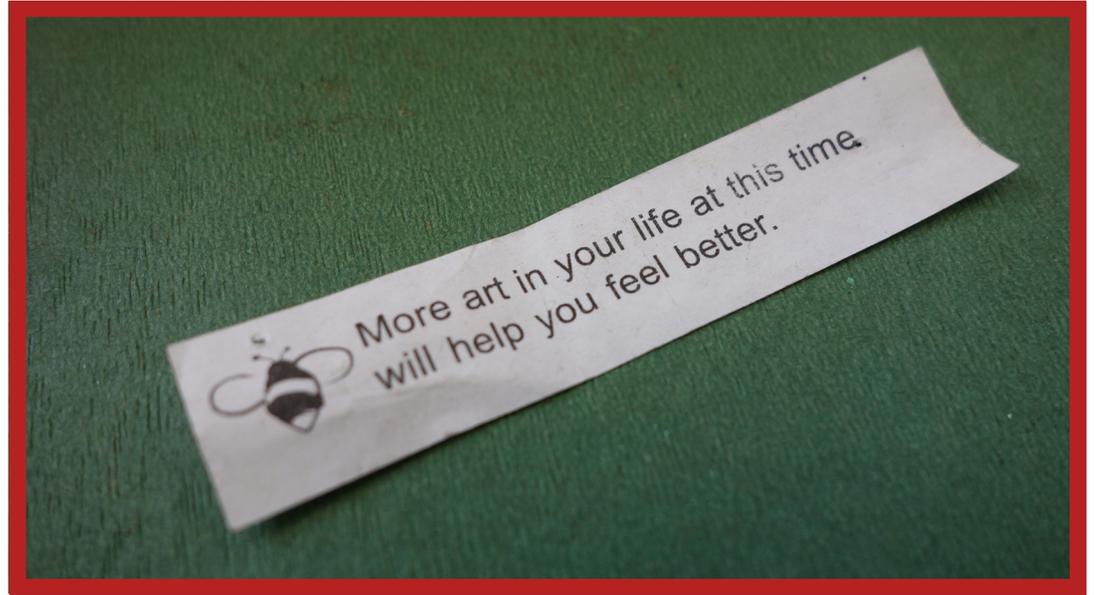


By Crista Cloutier

Public art means what it implies: it is work positioned to be accessible to the public or for a public space  
\*(even if that 'slice' of the public is the staff of a private corporation or private neighborhood, for example)

# WHY PUBLIC ART? WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

- Because the work will be in the public realm, your art will be seen in a new, different context to **potentially much broader audiences**. Doing a public art project gets your work outside the studio and beyond conventional art spaces.
- Public art projects often provide artists an opportunity to work in a larger scale or to try their concept in an installation-style format. These projects can also lend you the chance to work in other materials and mediums, supported by the expertise of specialty fabricators and other knowledgeable design team members.
- Once you gain public art commission experience, this can be another great way to supplement consistent income as a Working Artist!



# IS PUBLIC ART A GOOD IDEA FOR ME?



Public art is so **deeply related to place and the specificity of a site's context**, that **each project warrants unique consideration when you're thinking about applying.**

For example, if you only make delicate miniature sculptures the size of pins and the project clearly calls for large-scale painted wall murals, you may want to hold off. Wait to apply for a project that appears to fit what you do as an artist and your skill-set.

# I'M NEW TO PUBLIC ART. HOW DO I GAIN EXPERIENCE?

**Public art often demands seasoned experience.** The projects are typically larger and more ambitious with longer creation periods (3+ years from concept to completion). They often warrant design-team experience and the ability to effectively navigate amongst community, municipality or various corporate clients. You also need to be extremely savvy with budgets and possess an accurate sense of what materials, fabrication and possible labor will cost in order to bring your concept to fruition.

**If you are new to public art** and you wish to find ways to gain experience, or if elements of a submission opportunity seem intimidating or unclear:

- **Contact your local programs and request a short phone call or in-person meeting with a public art project manager.** Treat this time with the utmost professionalism, much like a job interview.

If you're seriously considering applying for a particular project, prepare questions to solicit guidance for your submission idea during your conversation with a project manager.

- Find out about other existing opportunities that would be suitable for artists less experienced with public art who are trying to get their feet wet.
- **Request to be placed on file with your local public art office as a future selection panelist.** Volunteering on a public art panel provides priceless insight about the process that can later help you strategically refine your own submissions.

# TIP FROM PUBLIC ART PROS:



If you apply for a public art call and you are not short-listed as a finalist nor ultimately selected for the project, here's something savvy and eye-opening that you can do: **Request to see the panelist notes and/or scoring from the review process.**

These records are deemed “public” so you are allowed to access them. Read up on the comments and reactions that were provided during the review session. These notes can help artists gain valuable information about how community members and art administrators view their work to better tailor their project ideas and submission materials in the future.

# CREATING YOUR PROPOSAL:

## *The Submission Process*



# YOUR IMAGES

**Above all else, you must carefully select your digital portfolio images for the submission process. Your images will make or break whether you are chosen for further contemplation.** Sometimes panelists never even see your written materials. Your artwork images are often the *only* thing that panelists have in order to determine if you're a possible fit for the project.

Use the highest quality images of your artwork; At least 300 dpi. If you don't have any good images, **invest in a professional photographer.**

**Include a variety of images of works that you're capable of** in the selection you submit (not just one style) so that the panel can feel confident you'll create something fitting and unique to a specific place/project. Panelists & stakeholders want to be sure that you are not a "one-size-fits-all" type of artist.



# IMAGE TIPS FROM PUBLIC ART PROS:

**Select at least one image of a person interacting with your artwork,** even if it's a picture of your nephew with your art! (this not only demonstrates scale but also conveys an emotional response between people and your work—a dynamic that is often a key consideration for public art)

**Place-making is paramount for public art considerations.** The best art image choices for your public art submission should hinge more on successful place-making versus whether you feel that these are your 'best' or 'favorite' pieces. **Choose artwork images that make the most appropriate connections with a place,** whether that was work you displayed in a gallery, situated in a garden, staged at a concert, placed in a restaurant, in someone's home, or as an earth art project or large-scale installation, etc. Plan to use at least two of these past works in your image line-up to write about in your letter of interest / cover letter. Elaborate on why those artworks worked so symbiotically or well for the place that they were sited in the letter.



# SUBMITTING FOR A **PUBLIC ART** PROJECT

Follow **all** submission directions & guidelines precisely when applying for a commission. Failure to follow directions or omit something will get you tossed out of the consideration pool!



Read each project description very carefully. Pay attention to the needs and goals of the stakeholders and community members.

Note if the opportunity calls for any specific types of art or materials and if the budget posted appears realistic enough for you to successfully build/complete the project **and** get paid for your time.

Research the area: the history of the community and how the place has been used; note the geography or other significant markers that distinguish the place.

# SUBMISSION CALLS:

What is the difference between RFPs and RFQs?



# RFQ - REQUEST FOR QUALIFICATION

This is a submission type that requests images and information regarding your professional background.

- any number of these items may be asked for: resume/CV, cover letter/letter of interest, website, project reviews/media).

You may be asked to briefly describe the kind of work you'd propose for the project in a written letter but the RFP mode **does not** require creating a full proposal/design.

- Artists generally prefer the RFQ process because creating a full proposal (as RFPs dictate) warrants an intensive amount of work—the kind of work that should ideally be compensated for.
- RFQs also allow selection panel members the benefit of seeing a variety of artists (experienced and newbies alike) and artwork styles.

# RFP - REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

RFPs require a full project proposal. This means doing extensive research and most likely conducting a site visit to fully support the idea you craft.

The proposal often demands complex mock-up designs of your idea (this can range from maquettes, drawings, CAD-style renderings, PowerPoint presentations, sculptures, etc.). You may also be asked to develop supporting information that can include detailed budgets, insurance, and even a break-down of fabricators or other subcontractors necessary to bring the proposal idea to reality.

An enormous downside to the RFP mode is that artists generally are **not** paid for their proposed idea unless they are ultimately selected for the commission. Because public art projects are infamously ambitious, time-consuming, complex and usually take years for completion, their design proposals are equally demanding. Generally speaking, many typically feel that the RFP style 'call' does not fully support and value the time and effort of artists. Weigh all of the issues and circumstances of the RFP carefully before applying since creating a full proposal could warrant considerable time without any compensation or the chance to be selected for the project.



# TIP FROM PUBLIC ART PROS

I cannot over-emphasize the importance of getting to know the art administrators in your area.

Offer to volunteer for public art events and selection panels. Go to ribbon-cutting ceremonies and public meetings about projects. Introduce yourself and make yourself part of their community with staff members, stakeholders and other public artists.

Sometimes public art staff can make “closed” or “invitational” calls – where artists are hand-selected for consideration based on knowledge that those individuals would be a good fit for a particular commission. These scenarios can open up to you more often if you’re an artist on their radar.



# MORE THINGS TO EXPECT IF YOU ARE CHOSEN FOR A PUBLIC ART COMMISSION

- Feel completely confident that what you're proposing is something you're comfortable with and you feel experienced enough to carry it through.
- Be prepared to **pore over the contract thoroughly**. Do not sign until all details are agreed upon between you and all parties.
- After reviewing the contract, ask yourself: **do you believe that the scope of work for your duties as the artist, and the final artwork are clearly described and outlined?** If they are not, go back for further clarification before signing on.
- Go into the process armed with the knowledge that **you may be responsible for insurance coverage**. (Again, check the contract very carefully and research how to best stay protected & covered!).
- **Make sure that the project is sufficiently funded**. Get confident with your value as an artist and the value of your time & expertise. If you do not feel certain that the budget assigned for the project is (A.) fair (B.) realistic, and (C.) can be completed successfully for the price along with the assurance of an artist's fee, you may want to consider turning down the commission at the onset.
- If you do accept the commission, **stick to the budget projected** and complete the work for that price. You cannot return later in the process to ask for more money. Plan to build in some internal padding or a contingency within your expenses while negotiating the contract terms in case things cost more than anticipated.

# MORE THINGS TO EXPECT IF YOU ARE CHOSEN FOR A PUBLIC ART COMMISSION

- Be certain that what you've proposed to create aligns (as much as possible) with what the community, client or stakeholders, art administrators and design team have expressed. \*It can be a red flag if your concept was accepted by community members & the client, but opposition emerges from other groups like a design team or arts council.
- **Be sure that you and your design team are on the same page as early as possible** in the process. If you feel disconnected from the design team, in the dark on their ideas & contributions, or maybe you're not seeing eye-to-eye, seek a project manager's counsel to help coordinate a smooth transition and integration.
- **Ask questions and make yourself accessible** to the residents, community members and business leaders who have taken an interest in you and the project. It is an integral component of what public art is all about; it's no longer just you working alone in the studio.
- Expect change as your constant with public art. Be flexible. The concept for the project will likely go through a myriad of revisions throughout the process.

“The flexibility to revise the project and respond to proposed changes is the most valuable skill an artist can acquire when seeking to create public art. Changing situations and the resulting alterations are the common currency of public art and artists must accept and expect alterations when agreeing to a public art commission.” – Stacy Levy (posted on PAN blog: How Projects Change from Initial Proposal to Final Installation)

# TIP FROM PUBLIC ART PROS:

After maintaining a good rapport with the community involved with a project, some artists have been delighted to discover some surprise perks. Because the residents and/or business leaders can be so positive and supportive about a project, these folks sometimes take it upon themselves to help raise more money or in-kind donations to enhance the project.

- **Stay in consistent communication** with your project manager or main client point-person for the project. This includes remembering to take “in progress” pictures of your design and creation throughout the process to share. This practice imbues confidence and trust with key stakeholders and clients.

- Numerous appeals for changes or behavior on your part that can be perceived as frequently complaining or expressing problems can weaken trust with your client

- Turn in deliverables and final products ahead of schedule or on the agreed-upon, contractual deadlines throughout the various phases of the process.



# TIP FROM PUBLIC ART PROS:



Keep in mind that most people grossly underestimate the amount of time necessary to complete something. A great rule of thumb is to consider the time frames suggested by stakeholders, fabricators, design teams (etc.) and multiply what they assess by two or three. This is also a prudent rule for you when plotting and negotiating contractual deadlines for various phases of completion on a project.

- The final creation that you plan to deliver should resemble the project idea (including drawings & plans)

that you and the team agreed upon. Sometimes the concept can undergo alterations or revisions due to budget restraints or other unforeseen changes, so adhere to the final agreed-upon plan.

- Do not attempt to turn in something that you think would be a better idea later on; doing so will erode trust between you and the stakeholders and could weaken your artistic integrity—not to mention your chances of getting hired for future public art opportunities.

“Future commissions will be affected by the experience your clients have with you. You owe it to your fellow artists to make each project successful.” --Greg Fiedler, President and CEO, Greater Flint Arts Council

# PUBLIC ART RESOURCES

## PLACES TO FIND OPPORTUNITIES + LEARN MORE

Public art agencies or percent-for-art programs in cities, states or countries generally publicize Calls for Artists. Artists should sign up for these announcements, along with subscriptions to art publications that regularly post public art opportunities.

And, as I am fond of emphasizing here at The Working Artist, I strongly encourage you to connect with artist communities online and in your local area. Other artists are your greatest allies. They will be among the first to alert you to public art opportunities that best fit your skill set and they can also be your top cheerleader: public art managers love artist recommendations made by other artists—especially if the project managers are receiving a referral from someone whom they have already built a trusted, good working relationship with!

- <https://www.callforentry.org>
- <http://www.publicartist.org>
- <http://www.artopportunitiesmonthly.com>
- <http://artdeadline.com>
- <http://forecastpublicart.org>
- <http://www.americansforthearts.org> (AMA)
- Public Art Network (PAN) – a subsidiary of AMA - <http://www.americansforthearts.org/by-program/networks-and-councils/public-art-network> \*(If you become an American For the Arts member, you can access a great deal of beneficial information, including being a part of PAN's listserv. I also recommend checking out articles on PAN's blog)

### BOOK RESOURCES

The Artist's Guide to Public Art by Lynn Basa  
Artists Reclaim the Commons by Glenn Harper and Twylene Moyer  
Public Art By the Book Edited by Barbara Goldstein

**The Working Artist Masterclass** is the premier online professional-practices program for visual artists of all media.



Crista Cloutier is the founder of The Working Artist, a unique online business experience for artists and other creatives. Through her program, Crista has served artists in over 60 countries. Crista is a firm believer that any artist can succeed – if they do the work. Crista’s resume includes time spent as a gallerist, award-winning documentary filmmaker, fine-art publisher, and she has curated dozens of exhibitions. She has been honored as an “Influencer in the Contemporary Art World” by LinkedIn. To learn more about how Crista can help you thrive as an artist, visit [www.theworkingartist.com](http://www.theworkingartist.com)

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